



NORTH EAST COMMUNITY FIREWOOD ACCESS PROJECT

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1. Background

Recent firewood studies in the North East have found:

- The Ovens-Murray region of Victoria uses between 21,000m³ and 40,000m³ of firewood per year.
- A shortfall of 2,000m³ of domestic firewood would occur in the Box-Ironbark area of public land in North East Victoria, once these areas were closed to collection.
- Firewood collection from native vegetation was a significant threat to biodiversity in many areas across the region.
- The majority of firewood collected comes from private land.

(Firewood in North East Victoria brochure 2004)

The State Government's priority is to ensure an ongoing domestic supply of firewood for local communities that are environmentally sustainable. To achieve this long-term supply for North East Victoria the government has funded four firewood projects developed by the community:

1. North East Firewood Access project
2. North East Firewood Plantation project
3. Firewood Harvesting Equipment project
4. Future Firewood Strategy development

This report relates to the North East Firewood Access project. This project has investigated ways local government operations can generate an immediate source of firewood to help relieve the firewood shortfall and to target the supply to concession cardholders.

The Rural City of Wangaratta and Indigo Shire have worked in partnership to research the following objectives:

- To look at methods of providing firewood that has been sourced from timber removed during normal council operations;
- To offer storage options for wood waste products from industries in the region;
- To liaise with community groups, industry and individuals to involve them in the project; and
- Where possible to target supply to concession card holders.

1.1 Steering Committee

The Victorian Government provided funding for the Rural City of Wangaratta and Indigo Shire Council to undertake the North East Community Firewood Access Project. This project was guided by representatives from Indigo Shire Council, Rural City of Wangaratta, North East Catchment Management Authority and the Department of Primary Industries. The development of this project has been

through background research, community consultation and steering committee meetings.

2. Environmental Considerations

2.1 Normal Council Operations

Council is involved in a number of activities that have the potential to provide timber to the community for firewood. The table below lists examples of these activities and includes what currently happens to the timber.

Activity	Action prior to this project
<p>Removal of trees or limbs that have encroached within the VicRoads road formation standards required for road user safety.</p> <p>In the past 2-3 years the Rural City of Wangaratta has been very proactive in these activities.</p>	<p>Medium to large contractor timber removal works usually involve the contractor utilising the timber as part of their payment.</p> <p>The smaller scale safety works tend to leave the timber on the roadside in a safe location.</p>
<p>Road construction activities including road widening, shoulder construction, black spot projects</p>	<p>Medium to large contractor timber removal works usually involve the contractor utilising the timber as part of their payment.</p> <p>The smaller scale safety works tend to leave the timber on the roadside in a safe location.</p>
<p>Environmental woody weed removal</p>	<p>By utilising volunteer/ community programs both Council's are active with on ground removal of woody weeds. There is the potential that some of these woody weeds could be utilised as potential firewood.</p> <p>There is the potential for other agencies and community groups involved in woody weed removal to contribute to providing firewood.</p>
<p>Removal of dangerous trees</p>	<p>If identified as dangerous these trees or limbs are removed. Usually these are individual trees and in most cases are left on site, utilised by the contractor or taken to the nearest transfer station.</p>
<p>Removal of branches or trunks of other Council managed trees including street trees, Parks and Gardens and caravan parks. This removal is for safety, landscaping or asset management protection.</p>	<p>As most of the timber removed during these operations is soft wood or branches/ heads the timber is either chipped or transported to nearest transfer station.</p>

Activity	Action prior to this project
The general public and contractors transport a variety of timber products to transfer stations or Bowser Landfill (Wangaratta). This timber comes in as green waste and waste timber	Currently these timber products are ‘sub-grinded’ into mulch. There is the potential that some of the garden waste and some of the waste timber could be utilised as firewood.
In the event of a natural disaster for example bushfire, windstorms or flood there is the potential that damaged timber could be utilised for firewood	In the event of a natural disaster Council works with relevant organisations to ensure that the damaged area is safe. There is the potential that damaged timber could be utilised for firewood.

Note: The above does not include VicRoads managed roads, it is just focusing on Council managed roads.

2.2 Roadside Biodiversity

The importance of roadsides for native vegetation is now well recognised as they often contain the only remaining native vegetation and habitat in an otherwise cleared landscape. Some of the North East’s most depleted and threatened ecological vegetation types are largely found on roadsides. Their contribution to the region’s biodiversity in forming refuges for isolated vegetation communities or providing wildlife corridors between larger patches of vegetated land is very important.

In recognition of the importance of roadside vegetation both the Rural City of Wangaratta and Indigo Shire Council have adopted strategies and management plans to guide the management of roadsides.



Photo 1: High conservation roadside

2.3 Roadside Management Plans/ Strategy

Section 3.7.1 from the Rural City of Wangaratta Roadside Management Strategy and Section 9 from Indigo Shire Council Roadside Management Plan 2003 relates to Firewood Collection and Timber and Seed Harvesting. Below is the wording from these sections:

Objective:

To minimise the reduction in wildlife habitat and damage to indigenous vegetation by minimising the removal for firewood from roadsides.

Context:

There will most likely be greater pressure to harvest timber from roadsides as other sources become less available. However the removal of fallen timber and standing timber can remove valuable animal habitat. It is recognised that timber that falls onto fences or onto the roads can be a safety hazard and needs to be removed from causing immediate danger.

The Native Vegetation Retention Controls make it illegal to remove any living vegetation. A permit is required for the removal of fallen timber and the collection of firewood from roadsides. Standing dead trees cannot be felled. Approvals will be based on equity and protection of the regeneration potential of rare, threatened or regionally significant species.

Guidelines:

Rural City of Wangaratta	Indigo Shire Council
Collection of firewood will not be allowed on High and Medium Conservation value roadsides. The exception is timber that has fallen after storm damage onto property fences or onto roads and presents a safety hazard.	Collection of firewood will not be allowed on High and Medium Conservation value roadsides. The exception is timber that has fallen onto property fences or onto roads and presents a safety or fire hazard.
Prevent the removal of major habitat trees	Prevent the removal of major habitat trees
Discourage the stacking of fallen timber as this may create a harbour for pest animals.	Collection of firewood is not permitted on roads managed by VicRoads

3. Social Considerations

The Victoria Government recognises that firewood provides an important source of heating for many people, particularly in regional Victoria. The townships of Eldorado (RCOW), Chiltern and Beechworth (ISC) have been identified as the communities immediately affected by the changes to firewood collection areas in the North East Box-Ironbark area.

The North East Firewood Strategy (2005) has based its recommendations on researched data that indicates households in the North East are consuming 40,000 tonnes each year. Of this 40,000 tonnes, firewood available through salvage from tree lopping and clean up operations totals 1,000 tonnes. (2.5% of total firewood consumed each year). Since RCoW and ISC are only 2 of the 6 Councils in the North East Catchment Management Area the figure of firewood sourced from RCoW and ISC normal Council operations would be closer to or less than 1%.

Data collected through the North East Firewood Strategy (2005) highlights that 44% of Wangaratta region households and 59% of the Beechworth/Chiltern region households require firewood.

While Centrelink was not able to supply exact figures, a large percentage of Eldorado, Chiltern and Beechworth populations are registered concession cardholders. What is hard to determine is the number of these concession cardholders who require firewood.

The existing firewood collection permit system through the Department of Sustainability and Environment offers a reduced price to persons with a concession/pensioner card.

The development of this project involved general community meetings at Wodonga, Chiltern, Wangaratta and Beechworth to gauge community comments. Responses were varied, with Beechworth and Wangaratta participants giving positive support to the concept and participants in Chiltern offering negative support. While in support of local government looking at ways of sourcing timber for firewood the participants in Wodonga felt that they were outside the focus area and not in a position to comment.

The community of Eldorado have been extremely supportive, with the Bush Users Group (BUG) being very hands on and proactive in disseminated information into the community. The focus of this project has centred on Eldorado due to the strong community support and ownership.

4. Developing a Community Firewood Depot

The concept of Community Firewood Depots has evolved through suggestions from the community and direction from the project Steering Committee. A Community Firewood Depot is where timber suitable for firewood is located at a nominated site which is accessible to the community especially those with concession cards.

This project researched suitable sites within each township and methods of disseminating the firewood. As with all research many dead ends and frustrations were encountered.

To develop a Community Firewood Depot the following guidelines need to be considered:

4.1 Road Reserve

- Contact Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), Wodonga to confirm status of road reserve and clarify if any licenses or leases are held.
- If a rural road, confirm roadside conservation status.
- Apply for a planning permit (Initial contact with community/ adjoining landholders will help the process)
- Contact Council's Insurance company to incorporate insurance requirements

4.2 Committee of Management Crown Land

- Contact DSE to confirm management status of the crown land
- Hold meeting/s with Committee of Management
- If interested in proceeding with establishing community firewood depot, contact DSE to start the process to nominate a section of land into Council management. There could be a cost involved
- Contact Council's Insurance company to incorporate insurance requirements
- Apply for a planning permit

Crown land under management of other Authorities (including VicTrack)

- Contact DSE to confirm management status of the crown land
- Hold meeting/s with management Authority eg VicTrack
- If interested in proceeding with establishing community firewood depot, contact DSE to start the process to nominate a section of land into Council management. There will be cost involved
- Contact Council's Insurance company to incorporate insurance requirements
- Apply for a planning permit

4.3 Crown land with Transfer Station status

- Work in partnership with Council's Waste Engineer/ Officer
- Make initial contact with DSE to keep them informed. The concept of a community firewood depot aligns with the purpose of a transfer station, where materials are transferred from waste to another use.
- If the operation of the transfer station is contracted out, make contact with contractor to work through details.
- Contact Council's Insurance company to incorporate insurance requirements
- Set aside a suitable area and signpost
- All timber suitable for firewood can be disposed free of charge in the designated area

4.4 Landfill

The general public are not allowed access into the landfill for occupational health and safety requirements. This project was unable to clearly establish a process where the timber coming into the Landfill could be used for firewood. The largest

hurdle is that the loads are coming in as 'mixed' loads not just as timber or green waste. Education on separating loads and taking suitable timber to a Transfer Station is a possibility but is outside the ability of this project.

The Rural City of Wangaratta and the North East Region Waste Management group (NevRwaste) are looking at projects and funding that could remove green waste/ organics from the Landfill waste stream. The potential to utilise suitable timber for firewood could be incorporated into these projects. The costs of truck loads could also encourage less 'mixed' loads, though any decision to alter pricing of waste disposal will need to be presented and approved by Council.

4.5 Natural Disaster – timber for firewood

In the event of a natural disaster then Council's procedure/policy relating to natural disaster clean up is to be followed. If the opportunity arises where damaged timber can be made available then Council will offer this timber to the community.

Recent examples of this include the hail storm damage in Stanley and the bushfire damage in the Chiltern area. In both cases Council consulted and worked in partnership with DSE and DPI. Special conditions were developed and the timber was made available to the immediate community for a specified time.

There is still a long way to go with education relating to different types of trees being suitable to burn, other than red wood. The community of Stanley did not access the storm-damaged timber, as it is perceived as lesser firewood potential. The need for education on a range of firewood issues has been addressed in the North East Firewood Strategy (2005).



Photo 2: Wind blown damage

5. Community Firewood Depots

5.1 Eldorado

Working in partnership with the Bush User Group (BUG) a number of locations within the township of Eldorado were identified. After following the above guidelines, the location of Fitzpatrick Lane was approved as a trial community firewood depot. After liaising with the Eldorado Store and the Department of Primary Industries (DPI), approval was given to utilise the existing departmental firewood permit system. Some conditions were set and these were attached to each permit.

To assist the community firewood depot three loads of firewood were trucked into Fitzpatrick Lane during the 2004 firewood season and one truck load during 2005 firewood season. This project tried to utilise timber damaged from the 2003 bushfires, though the transporting and 'green-ness' of the wood was cost prohibitive.

The success of the four deliveries was that the timber was dispersed into the community within 24hours of arriving. A review of the firewood permits issued indicated that:

- The Eldorado community in general was honest with how much they collected.
- All addresses were Eldorado addresses
- Those on community cards were accessing the timber

In addition to the firewood, numerous trees removed from Council Parks and Reserves for safety reasons have been transported to Fitzpatrick Lane. The collection of this timber is positive as there has been a variety of timber including softwood and green timber that is being stored for next winter.



Photo 3: Eldorado resident with firewood permit

5.2 Chiltern

As with the Eldorado situation a variety of locations for community firewood depot were identified. There was a time delay in obtaining planning permission due to the management status of some of the suggested sites, incorrect landholder fencing and community feedback. Planning permission was granted to establish a community firewood depot on Anderson Rd Chiltern.

Anderson Road community firewood depot has been up and running from Easter 2005, for the start of the 2005 firewood season. As with the Eldorado example Council liaised with the Chiltern Newsagency and DPI to utilising the existing departmental firewood permit system.

The initial load of firewood was delivered to Anderson Rd to raise awareness of the depot. As with Eldorado the timber was accessed through the permit system over the weekend it was delivered. Indigo Shire Council has also transported dry timber removed for safety reasons to the Chiltern depot. Some of this timber has been accessed though not as strongly as the Eldorado community firewood depot.

5.3 Beechworth

Research with DSE staff highlighted that there are no suitable road reserves within the Beechworth area to establish a community firewood depot. A solution is to utilise an area of the Beechworth Transfer station. During the latter part of 2004 Indigo Shire Council undertook community consultation relating to the future of its transfer stations. No action on this community firewood depot was undertaken whilst awaiting outcomes from this consultation. Since Council has decided not to close the Beechworth transfer station the community firewood depot can continue.

An area of land has been levelled and sectioned off for the disposal of timber by Council and the community. Indigo Shire's Insurance Company, Civic Mutual Plus, advises that the general public be not allowed to use chainsaws to cut up the timber.

Council has transported timber to the firewood section of the transfer station and has utilised prison labour (see section 6.3) to cut the timber into rounds that is then placed in piles of 1 cubic metre. Indigo Shire Council has called for expressions of interest from concession card holders in the community who would like firewood. A list of these people is being kept and when the timber is available a letter is mailed out to the concession card holder. The concession card holder then presents the letter to the transfer station attendant and they are shown their pile of wood. There is the potential to involve a willing community group to assist in the deliver/loading of the firewood.

The name of the concession card holder is then removed from the list. If they are interested in a further load of firewood they need to reapply.

This system has allowed Council to direct the timber directly to concession card holders, the section of the community that are really struggling with the cost or ability to collect firewood. The development of this system has seen Council's community services, engineering and environment staff working together to assist the community.

The firewood is being offered for free as there is no cost to council for transportation or 'processing' the timber into firewood. If in the future there are costs then this maybe reflected in placing a cost for the firewood. Careful consideration needs to be given to placing a cost on the firewood as the concept is for the under privileged to access the firewood and the firewood will be a variety of timbers, not just the 'known' timbers people pay for.

5.4 Honeysuckle Firewood Collection Area Wooragee

Whilst not part of the local government project, it is worth mentioning this firewood collection area as it played a major role in calming public concerns relating to available firewood. This area had a large volume of trees that had been illegally cut down just after the 2003 bushfires. DPI and DSE set Honeysuckle up like a community firewood depot with the trees positioned so firewood permit holders could access the timber. There were site specific permit conditions, in addition to the normal permit conditions that were attached to each permit.

The information recorded on the Honeysuckle permits indicates that people did travel from nearby areas (Beechworth, Eldorado, Chiltern, Yackandandah and Wooragee) and those on community cards were accessing the timber for firewood.

5.5 Temporary Community Firewood Depots

There may be occasions that Council undertakes tree/limb removal in areas where a temporary community firewood depot will need to be established. A planning permit will not be needed, as the community firewood depot is temporary.

It is encouraged that the community is informed of the works prior to them starting and for Council to seek guidance from the community as to the best location for the timber. A recent example is the removal of sugar gums in the Boorhaman area. The Rural City of Wangaratta liaised with the Boorhaman community and a location next to the fire shed was chosen for the timber to be stacked and the community has now accessed. (See also section 4.5 Natural Disaster).



Photo 4: Temporary community firewood depot next to CFA shed

5.6 Planning Permits

Research with both the Rural City of Wangaratta and Indigo Shire Council Planning Departments identified that the establishment of community firewood depots was not an identified activity listed in the planning scheme. After discussions with planners it was decided that the planning permit process would be appropriate in all cases except transfer stations. The planning permit process allowed adjoining landholders, the community and Councillors the opportunity to be aware and to comment on the proposed community firewood depot.

While this increased the timeframe to establishing a community firewood depot it allowed greater community ownership towards to the depot concept.

5.7 Firewood Permits

DPI's firewood permit system is an important part of the community firewood depots. The permit system already exists and the community is aware of the permit system. The permit system also includes information relating to contact details and concession card details of people being issued firewood permits.

Advice from the Department was that the firewood permit system can only be utilised where timber has been sourced from crown land and is available for collection on crown land. For example the tree has been removed for a road reserve and has been placed at a community firewood depot on crown land. The permit can not be used if timber is placed in private property or if timber is not indigenous native vegetation or has been sourced from private land.

The Beechworth transfer station model is a system that could overcome the issue of non-native timber or timber from private land being distributed to the community.

Access to the Beechworth transfer station is only during normal operation hours (Friday to Monday 1pm-5pm).

In the cases where non indigenous timber (like sugar gums) are removed, a firewood permit is not required and access can be by anyone. While this situation is not ideal and may need further thought if large volumes of timber becomes available, this method is getting timber into the community instead of being chipped or removed. It is also assisting in the education that timber other than 'red' timber can be burnt.

6. Community involvement

6.1 TAFE Chainsaw training

The two main chainsaw training providers in the North East Box-Ironbark focus area are Wodonga TAFE and the Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE, Wangaratta. Contact was made with both training providers and responses were positive. There is potential to coordinate the cutting of timber as part of a TAFE chain saw cross cut training if the following can be provided:

- Location of timber to be cut is to be positioned where safety of participants is not compromised
- TAFE undertakes an OH&S assessment before training
- A variety of timber is preferable
- Timber not to be too stacked – students need to be able to reach the timber safely
- There is to be no excess dirt in the logs
- Access to loader could be of assistance
- At least 4 tree lengths per participant required (6-8 people per training course therefore 24-32 tree lengths required)

At this stage there is not the volume of timber available at a community firewood depot to involve a TAFE chainsaw training. If the opportunity arises then TAFE are keen to be involved.

6.2 Community Groups

There are a variety of community groups that have the potential to be involved in community firewood depots. The issue of insurance and the level of involvement would need to be arranged by each interested group. Currently the Bush User Group (BUG) has been the only group to be actively involved in the project. Their involvement has been to disseminate information into the community.

6.3 Beechworth Prisoner Assistance

As part of this project discussions with Beechworth Prison have been ongoing. These discussions have focused on utilising the Prison community or Landcare crew/s to cut and stack the firewood. Correspondence from Beechworth Prison's Industry Manager states:

"Beechworth Prison looks upon this as a positive community project and are keen to assist your organisation as well as providing prisoners with meaningful reparation opportunities"(16 June 2004).

The Prison have held the initial TAFE chainsaw trainings for the prisoners and Council has provided two full sets of chainsaws and the appropriate safety equipment. The Prisoners have started participating in the Beechworth Community Firewood Depot and this timber is available to the Beechworth Concession card holders.

This involvement will relate to the volume of timber available.

6.4 Timber Off-cuts List

In response to community concerns that there is 'waste' timber suitable for firewood that is currently not being accessed, Council issued an expression of interest for companies to register there timber off-cuts. From these expressions of interest a list has been compiled (***refer attachment***) and has been distributed through both Council areas. This list is promoted at the start and during each firewood season.

At the conclusion of the 2006 firewood season, each of the participating companies will be contacted to gauge the success of this timber off-cut list.

6.5 Other Councils and VicRoads

Any local government authority can access and utilise the findings of this project. Indigo Shire Council and the Rural City of Wangaratta have presented information relating to this project at a variety of forums including the Box-Ironbark Committee in Bendigo, the North East Local Government Environment Officers network meeting and at a CMA innovative natural resource management forum.

In many council areas VicRoads is responsible for the contractor works relating to road safety. There is the potential for VicRoads tree/limb removal operations to be incorporated into this project.

Copies of this report will be made available to interested parties including local government, VicRoads, DSE, DPI and the North East Catchment Management Authority.

7. Education

Currently the community welcomes access to 'red/traditional' firewood. Firewood burnt in New Zealand and the Northern Hemisphere is predominantly softwood while Australia has a range of hardwood that has become the traditional wood people request.

The education aspects of the North East Firewood Strategy will help other timbers to be accepted as firewood. The following Council works will initially focus on red/traditional firewood timbers but a change in community understanding will hopefully allow other timbers like softwood and street tree limbs to be left at community firewood depots for collection.

7.1 Council works

When calculating the cost to undertake tree lopping or tree removal Council is to consider the cost to locate or transport timber to a suitable location. If the works are occurring in close proximity to a community firewood depot then the timber should be transported. If a large number of limbs/trees are being removed then a temporary firewood collection area is to be established, following the guidelines within this document.

Council would need to correctly budget the tree/limb removal works to include transportation and the fact that if the contractor is not keeping the timber they may charge Council more for the works to occur.

7.2 Non-Council works

There are many other tree removal/lopping operations occurring in North East Victoria, where the timber removed could be included in this project or utilised as firewood. The establishing of a community firewood depot within a transfer station will hopefully start capturing this timber.



Photo 5: Potential of softwood being utilised following change in community understanding

8. Conclusion

This project has allowed the Rural City of Wangaratta and Indigo Shire Council to look internally at existing tree operations. This review has allowed a range of opportunities to be created where the community can access timber that would have otherwise have been a waste product.

The Rural City of Wangaratta and Indigo Shire Council offers this information to all interested organisations and hopes that this project assists in changing attitudes and increases awareness that waste timber can become firewood and will assist our communities keep warm.